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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this digest is to describe school counselors' roles in the area of assessment through an historical review of testing in counseling, and to report on study findings regarding roles employers require school counselors to perform. Knowledge needed by counselors to obtain evidence, evaluate its usefulness, and interpret its meaning have long been and continue to be debated. in the 1960s tests were viewed positively, but by the 1970s it was felt that "the marriage between tests and counseling had failed." The negative consequences of "labeling" were emphasized. However, assessment has remained commonplace in schools and, particularly in vocational guidance, used principally as a guide for professionals to seek additional information for decision making. The job role expectations of counselors can be divided into six areas: (1) counseling (individual and group); (2) pupil assessment; (3) consultation; (4) acting as information officer; (5) acting as school program facilitator; and (6) research and evaluation. Each of these have assessment-intensive aspects such as test interpretation, test development, evaluation of programs, consulting, and research. Thus, the assessment skills counselors need include: doing pupil assessment, doing program evaluation, and using basic research. Contains eight references. (JBJ)

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ERIC DIGEST

Assessment Skills for School Counselors

by William D. Schafer

ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services

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ERIC DIGEST

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Assessment Skills for School Counselors

William D. Schafer

Perhaps the most controversial area within counselor education is that of assessment. Following Shertzer and Linden (1979), assessment is used here to mean methods or procedures that are employed to obtain information that describes human behavior. The purpose of this digest is to describe school counselors' roles in the area of assessment. Following an historical review of testing in counseling, some findings of a study by Schafer and Mufson (1993) that described roles employers require school counselors to perform are discussed. Conclusions are related to improving quantitative literacy in counselor education.

Historical Perspective

Knowledge needed by counselors to obtain evidence, evaluate its usefulness, and interpret its meaning have long been and continue to be debated. According to Minor and Minor (1981), that debate arose, in part, from the adoption of a humanistic perspective by many counselors and counselor educators, leading to a de-emphasis of models of counseling that entail quantitative assessment. In the 1960's, tests were viewed positively and were used primarily to identify students of outstanding abilities (Zytowski, 1982). However, in the early 1970's, Goldman (1972) suggested, using a well-known metaphor, that the marriage between tests and counseling had failed. At about that time, courts prohibited some established tests for certain purposes and legislatures passed bills to regulate aspects of the use of standardized tests. The validity and practical utility of all testing and appraisal techniques were questioned and negative consequences of "labeling" were emphasized.

Yet assessment remained commonplace in schools. Consider these findings in a survey by Engen, Lamb, and Prediger (1981) and reported by Zytowski (1982): 93% of secondary schools administered at least one test to all students; 76% administered achievement test batteries; 66% administered academic aptitude or intelligent tests; and 16% administered inventories of school or social adjustment or personality tests. By the 1980's, vocational guidance, according to Zytowski (1982), had become a unifying force between counseling and testing.

Zytowski (1982) described several changes that had been made in tests, themselves, and in their uses in counseling. One of these was an erosion of reliance on predictive validity and an accompanying emphasis on convergent and discriminant validity, along with construct validity. He also described the value of an assessment in terms of its ability to guide and motivate a professional toward seeking additional information for decision making. De-formalizing assessment, another change, included increased use of one-item measures, informed self estimates, and card sorts or inventories in which quantified outcomes are less important than is the process the client engages in. Computers had become more instrumental in testing, from primarily scoring and score reporting to actual test administration and providing immediate feedback. Availability and interest in computer testing have clearly increased in the decade since Zytowski's summary appeared.

The counseling community has become more aware of ethical issues in testing. An American Counseling Association (ACA) statement titled Responsibilities of Users of Standardized Tests (RUST), published in 1978 and revised in 1989, urges awareness of differing purposes for testing and reminds us to consider the limitations of tests for any purpose and to evaluate the costs of not testing or using alternative methods of gathering the information needed.

Job Descriptions of School Counselors

In their study of skills needed by school counselors, Schafer and Mufson (1993) reviewed job analyses conducted by five school districts in five different states. They found a natural division of the job role expectations of school counselors into six areas: counseling (individual and group), pupil assessment, consultation, information officer, school program facilitator, and research and evaluation. There are assessment-intensive aspects of each of these.

The counselor's major function in the school is to counsel students individually and whenever practical in small or large groups. The counselor also is responsible for identifying students with special needs. These activities include interpreting test scores and non-test data.

Pupil assessment includes scheduling and preparing for testing, scoring them or sending them out for scoring, recording results, and scheduling for interpretation. Counselors are also responsible for assisting students in evaluating their aptitudes and abilities through interpreting standardized tests. They may be expected to advise teachers who need to understand psychological evaluations and who are interested in improving their content-referenced testing skills.

The third function is that of a consultant. The counselor consults with and advises teachers, parents, and administrators in guidance matters and test score interpretation. In some schools the counselor helps teachers with psychological evaluations and content-referenced testing

CG025951

and advises school committees in selection of tests.

The function of information officer includes informing parents, teachers, and staff about counseling services, informing employers and colleges about students according to school policy, and ensuring two-way communication between school and home. Many of these activities involve test interpretation.

The fifth function is administrative, including school administration and counseling administration. Within school administrative, the counselor is responsible for administering tests. Within counseling administrative functions, the counselor is expected to analyze guidance services. Also, the counselor is often asked to participate in decisions about the instructional curriculum.

The sixth function is research and evaluation. The counselor may be responsible for evaluating the school guidance program. The counselor is also expected to read and interpret literature to apply research findings to everyday counselees' situations and to improve his or her skills continuously through evaluation of counseling techniques.

The counselor responsibilities identified by Schafer and Mufson (1993) would likely be found in the large majority of school districts across the nation. Within the area of assessment, roles include test interpreter, test developer, evaluator of programs, consultant, and researcher. Several studiesreviewed by Schafer and Mufson (1993) were supportive of these roles.

Assessment Skills Required by School Counselor Roles

The roles that have been identified imply that counselors should have certain skills related to assessment. Schafer and Mufson (1993) organized these into three areas: doing pupil assessment, doing program evaluation, and using basic research.

Doing pupil assessment includes: types of assessment; assessment systems and programs; test administration and scoring; test reporting and interpretation; test evaluation and selection; design, analysis, and improvement in instrument development; formal and informal methods of assessment; methods for using assessment in counseling; administrative uses of assessment; computer-based applications; and ethics of using assessments.

Doing program evaluation includes: needs assessment; formative and summative evaluation; sources of evaluation research invalidity (instrumental, internal, and external); choosing evaluation designs; choices of and computational methods for descriptive and inferential statistics; writing evaluation proposals and reports; disseminating information; and research ethics.

Using basic research includes: locating and obtaining relevant research reports; reading and summarizing research reports; evaluating validity of instruments and research designs; and purpose and assumptions of common inferential statistical procedures.

Conclusions

Schafer and Mufson (1993) generated aspects of school counselors' roles that are related to assessment. They also generated a list of assessment-related content areas in the CACREP standards that pertain to school counselor education programs. In order to study the fit of these two lists, for each job-definition role, they reviewed those CACREP content areas that seemed supportive of it. They concluded that these CACREP skills, conscientiously presented in a counselor education program, would in most areas constitute an adequate preparation for a beginning-level school counselor.

Focusing on the role of test interpreter, however, Goldman (1982) found little research evidence that tests as they have been used by counselors have made much of a difference to the people they serve. He felt the reasons are that counselors have not been prepared adequately to understand psychometric evidence, and that the predictive validity of test information is inadequate to support individual interpretation. He suggested that schools and other institutions should reduce the use of standardized tests and replace them with less formal and less quantitative methods. However, the implications for assessment in counselor education programs of such a shift are unclear. It seems unlikely that formal assessment methods will disappear from schools.

Perhaps, as Daniels and Altekruse (1982) observed, lack of integration of assessment and counseling rests on counselor educators' failure to provide integrating guidelines in both assessment and counseling coursework. Among other recommendations, they concluded that counselor educators should become more responsible for teaching assessment content as well as for demonstrating its interrelations with counseling in their other courses. Shertzer and Linden (1982) have suggested that a more systematic approach to counselor education at both the preservice and the inservice levels can produce professionals who are more sophisticated in the practice of assessment and appraisal. The same seems true in the areas of program evaluation and basic research.

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